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ABSTRACT

The "problem-posing" education model of Paulo Freire takes as its departure point the life experience of the learner, rather than the teacher's knowledge. Ursuline College (Cleveland, Ohio) created several courses for returning adult students that were based on Freire's ideas. One course called "Humanities Focus on Life" is for adults who are new to college life. Initial weeks are devoted to the development of language arts skills, and to the idea of group process. The first essay assignment is accompanied by teacher-led brainstorming sessions on possible topics and on audience and purpose, and students are also introduced to the processes of writing multiple drafts and group editing. Concurrent with this intensive instruction in communication skills, small group discussions initiate the process of confidence building, a major course goal. Students experience learning as a process of critical inquiry--the most important goal of the course--primarily through formal and informal discussions of the assigned texts. Attention is focused on problems that concern the author of the text under study, and students are required to relate these issues to their own experiences. Subject matter of the first set of texts--by John Stuart Mill, John Dewey, and Freire--and the first three essays is the relationship of education to experience and the nature of the learning process. Later authors studied include Herman Hesse, Carl Jung, and Plato. After completion of a final essay that articulates the learning experience by showing how the student's thinking has changed during the semester, a learning goal consonant with this new thinking must be identified and achieved in a few weeks time. Students who complete this Freirean model course understand that they are responsible for what they learn and that learning involves communication with others. (NKA)

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FREIREAN LITERACY AND THE LIBERAL ARTS: EMPOWERING THE RETURNING ADULT

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FREIREAN LITERACY AND THE LIBERAL ARTS: EMPOWERING THE RETURNING ADULT

by

Ann Trivisonno

Ursuline College is a Catholic, liberal arts institution which currently serves approximately 1500 students, more than 60% of whom are over 22 years of age. As part of a long-range planning process initiated a few years ago, the College revised its mission statement. One of the philosophers whose thinking had a strong influence on the development of the new statement was Paulo Friere. His model of the learning process became known on the Ursuline campus after a group of faculty based some very successful courses for returning adults on it. In order to suggest the appeal of Freire's ideas to those of us who developed these courses, I will begin by giving you a brief sketch of his model. Then after alluding to the impact of these ideas on the Ursuline College mission statement, I will speak at some length about the courses for returning adults that were based on the Freirean model.

According to Freire, humans are incomplete; they are "beings in the process of becoming." Furthermore, they exist in a world that is also in process, undergoing constant change. Unlike other incomplete beings, however, humans are conscious of their unfinished condition, and, as a consequence, they are searchers. They want to be more authentic, more fully human. They can achieve this goal by reflecting on their relationship to the world, by recognizing that their situation is not unalterable, and by intervening to take control of their own lives. Fully human behavior, therefore, involves both thought and action, critical inquiry and creative transformation. It results in the development of a critical consciousness.

The purpose of education, it follows, is to stimulate authentic reflection and action, not, in Freire's well-known banking metaphor, to make deposits of knowledge. This goal can be achieved through what Freire calls "problem-posing" education. The point of departure of problem-posing education is the lived experience of the learner, not the knowledge of the teacher. As learners reflect on themselves in their worlds, they understand the deeper implications of their situations. Elements in these situations begin to stand out and take on the character of problems and therefore of challenges. As relationships between the problems in their worlds become apparent, learners feel increasingly obliged to respond to new challenges. Ultimately they perceive themselves as committed to action that will bring about change. Thus problem-posing education is oriented toward the future, yet it values the past for the understanding that it provides of the present.

Freire further argues that those who would become problem-posing educators must recognize that critical inquiry cannot take place in isolation. "Knowledge," says Freire in The Pedagogy of the Oppressed, "emerges only through invention and reinvention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry men pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other." In problem-posing education authentic dialogue is essential. In other words, both teachers and students must engage in it. Teachers are responsible to present material to students for their consideration, but they must reflect on it with the students and reshape their own understanding of it in light of the insights offered by the students. In problem-posing education, students and teachers teach each other; they both assume responsibilty for a process in which everyone learns.

The Ursuline College mission statement sets Freire's model of learning in a liberal arts context. Ursuline College views humans as historical beings and education as an empowering process that takes place in a community of learners. The questions raised in this community are the fundamental questions about human existence that are considered in the classic works of the liberal arts tradition. By engaging in spoken and written dialogue about these questions, members of the Ursuline community enhance their ability to think critically about their lives and to make free and mature decisions about changing the situations in which they find themselves.

The first courses on the Ursuline campus that fully embodied Freire's ideas were created, with the assistance of NEH funds, to meet the needs of the large number of returning adults who arrived on the Ursuline campus during the late 1970's. In order to determine these needs, those of us who volunteered to develop and teach the courses explored a number of resources. One, of course, was the Freirean adult literacy project. Another was research on adult learning styles. These studies argue, as Freire does, that adults are concerned about solving real life problems and that they integrate past experience with new learning in order to acheive this goal. A third resource was our own classroom experience which taught us that returning adults are often unsure of themselves as learners and that they often begin with narrowly defined career goals. We concluded that any program designed for adult learners should have the following goals:

1. to provide students with the experience of learning as a process of critical inquiry and creative transformation;
2. to inspire them to move beyond narrow career goals to the broader perspectives provided by a study of the liberal arts;

3. to help them build confidence in themselves as learners.

With our program goals set, we next considered the diverse audiences that the courses would probably serve. In order to afford students choices, we decided to develop three courses instead of one. The first, called Humanities: Focus on Life, was designed for students who have been away from academic life for a period of time. In this course students explore the relationship between experience and education, they analyze the learning process and they learn to formulate their own learning goals. The other two courses introduce students to specific areas of the liberal arts, and they usually attract adults who are new to Ursuline but not to the academy. In Science and the Human Condition students consider the nature of science and technology, the need to humanize science, the meaning of values, especially moral values, and some recent innovations in the life sciences that have resulted in moral dilemmas. In Humanities through the Arts students learn how to analyze the principles and characteristics of five major art forms, to respond to art on the emotional and intellectual levels, to relate the arts to each other and to their cultural contexts and to interpret the arts as expressions of human values.

In order to ensure that students in all three courses experience learning as critical inquiry, we sought out materials and learning activities that stimulate authentic dialogue - both written and spoken - between students and authors, between students and teachers, and, of course, among the students. We also built instruction in communication skills into all three courses so that students are empowered to participate in the dialogue. In Humanities Focus on Life, which I team-teach with a member of the counseling staff, the instruction is

extensive because the students who enroll in this course are new to academic life.

During the first weeks of the semester many assignments and a considerable amount of class time are devoted to the development of reading, speaking, listening and writing skills. Adler and Van Doren's How to Read a Book, which describes and analyzes the process of active reading, is a required text for the course. We assign several chapters of this book each week, and in class apply the techniques that the authors advocate to the texts we are reading. We also supply a number of handouts on group process, including some that describe group roles, and we encourage students to become aware of the roles that they typically play and to experiment with ones that they are not accustomed to.

Assistance with writing is provided by an array of strategies that are introduced early and developed as the semester progresses. During the first week of class we use a writing sample to identify students with serious problems in organization and syntax. These students are asked to enroll in the Writing Lab for weekly tutorial sessions. When the first essay is assigned during the second week of the course, my partner and I lead a brainstorming session on possible topics and talk about audience and purpose. Thereafter brainstorming takes place prior to each writing assignment, usually in small groups which the students facilitate. With each new essay, another point about effective writing is discussed and exemplified in handouts.

As they prepare the first essay, students are also introduced to the processes of writing multiple drafts and participating in group editing. Before the first editing session, my partner and I demonstrate the process using a paper written by one of the students during the previous semester. Then students form groups of three and

critique each other's papers using editing sheets supplied by us. During the time allotted for group editing they are free to leave the classroom and work anywhere they wish in the building. Once the editing session is under way, my partner and I circulate among the groups providing assistance when it is requested.

After essays have been turned in and evaluated, but before they are returned, we invite several students who handled the assignment well to read their papers to the class. Then we ask the group to identify the strengths of the paper. This strategy sets a standard against which the rest of the class can measure their own achievement. Furthermore, it identifies the strong writers who can provide assistance in future editing sessions.

At the same time that intensive instruction in communication skills is being provided in Humanities Focus on Life, the discussions that will empower students to achieve the major goals of the course begin. (These conversations, therefore, provide a very real reason for students with weak communication skills to improve them.) One of the first discussions concerns past successes and it initiates the process of confidence-building - a major course goal. Students list the successes of each period of their lives and explain why they regard them as such. In small groups other students analyze these achievements and identify the qualities of character which made them possible. Finally, one by one, the students articulate for the rest of the class what they learned about themselves as a result of participating in the exercise.

Students experience learning as a process of critical inquiry - the most important goal of the course - primarily through formal and informal discussions of the assigned texts. These discussions are initiated during the second week of the semester and they take up most

of the time that students spend on the course, both in and out of class, for the rest of the semester. The informal discussions begin in the classroom, at first in two large groups facilitated by one of the instructors, and later in groups of five or six led by one of the students. We help students to prepare for these discussions by supplying guided reading questions which perform two functions: they focus the students' attention on the problems that concern the author and they require students to relate these issues to their own experience. As the semester progresses, the questions also lead students to make connections between the ideas of the various authors and therefore to build their own conceptual framework of the course.

Informal discussions of the texts continue outside the classroom in learning journals, in which students record further reflections on the texts generated by the class discussion, and on weekly feedback sheets. The feedback sheets usually contain several questions that enable students to focus on insights gained from the class discussions of the texts and to react to class activities designed to foster dialogue. Sometimes informal discussions even continue in conversations in the student lounge during class breaks! All of this informal dialogue is designed to generate the ideas that students discuss formally in the five essays written during the semester.

The subject matter of the first set of texts and the first three essays is the relationship of education to experience and the nature of the learning process. Students read and discuss the ideas of John Stuart Mill, John Dewey and, of course, Paulo Friere. In the first two essays they relate these ideas to their own lives by describing and analyzing personal experiences of growth and of oppression. In the third essay they integrate the ideas of the three authors with their own experience to construct a personal philosophy of education.

During the second part of the course they use their theories to evaluate the learning experiences of others as they read and discuss fictional and autobiographical accounts of the lives of others. Authors read include Ralph Ellison, Doris Lessing, Viktor Frankl, Herman Hesse, Dorothy Day and Carl Jung. In one longer essay they write about the similarities and differences between two of these individuals as learners. The final readings of the course are drawn from the works of Plato and they invite students to evaluate their conception of the learner and the learning process in the light of his. The final essay, turned in on the last day of class, is a lengthy paper in which students describe their experience of the course by integrating all of the texts, materials, and activities and indicating the changes that have been effected in their thinking during the semester. Invariably these papers reveal that students' educational goals have been altered. Narrow career goals have become much less important than the broader goal of creating a more humane society.

Simply to state that these changes have occurred is not, however, sufficient in Humanities Focus on Life. As Freire has pointed out, authentic thought leads inevitably to action. Therefore, during the last weeks of the semester, students identify a learning goal that is consonant with their new thinking, one that they can achieve in a few weeks. Next they design a course project to achieve that goal, and work either independently or in concert with other students who have similar interests. Finally, they share what they have learned from the project through a class presentation. By the end of the semester, students in Humanities Focus on Life have accepted the responsibility not only to engage in authentic dialogue, but also to select and present the material that the class will reflect on.

On the last day of class, students also participate in the evaluation process, by filling out detailed teacher-, course-, and self-evaluation forms. My colleague and I consult the self-evluation forms after we have carefully considered the overall performance of each student and determined final grades. In the relatively few instances when there has been a discrepancy between our assessment and that of a student, we reconsider ours in the light of the student's comments. If we are unable to resolve the discrepancy based on the information provided on the self-evaluation form, we call the student in for a conference. In some situations we have resolved discrepancies by changing grades; in others we have determined that students have not viewed themselves objectively.

The power of the Freirean model of learning has been demonstrated among returning adults at Ursuline College now for several years. When students finish these courses, they understand that they are responsible for what they learn, but they also know that learning involves communication with others. As a result of the dialogue that begins on the first day of class and continues throughout the semester in a variety of forms and on a range of subjects, these students leave the courses feeling confident about their ability to engage in critical inquiry and effective action. Now that the Freirean model has been incorporated into our new mission statement, all of our students will have the opportunity to experience its power.